everyday heroes

There's no need to be Waiting for Superman. Heroes are everywhere in education, and their stories are worth telling.

When we sat down to draft the outline for this article, we were reeling from the Oprah Winfrey special on the *Waiting for Superman* documentary. Taken as a snapshot on urban education, the film paints a one-sided view of reform and its practitioners. Anyone "in the know" recognizes that everyday educators and community leaders were misrepresented.

Our concern was for all those folks who would be duped into believing that there were only a few heroes in education. We thought that the documentary portrayed caring as a unique, unusual characteristic in U.S. schools and missed completely that it has been a part of the moral imperative that has been driving lead reform agents for decades.

There are lots of heroes in education; they're everywhere. The efforts, dedication and commitment of our colleagues to create learning organizations that awaken the spirit of children in spite of their life circumstances and build capacity for those that have not had the benefit of privilege is worth telling. These stories are not driven by public personalities but by pedagogy and powerful protocol with proven track records.

District-level, systemic change

One of our heroes is Dennis Parker. When Parker left the California Department of Education in 2000 – after a 30-year career – he wanted to contribute differently to the quality of school operations without the burden of state political limitations. He perceived that there had to be a district-level systemic change process that would go beyond intervention and triage to sustainable reform. His model, Strategic Schooling, is organized into four interacting domains, all working together to produce optimal performance:

1. Targets: achievement targets, student targets, content targets

2. Feedback: data and examples of student work directly related to the targets

3. Know-how: the application of organizational, classroom and personal expertise by educators, students and parents in an effort to hit the targets

4. Context: the environment in which all of this occurs

The focus of the theory is optimal human performance in whatever enterprise you choose to apply it, including education. It can be stated as follows: If you set clear, ambitious, public targets; if you get frequent, visual and verbal feedback; if you apply a modification of existing know-how or develop new know-how from an outside source and apply it to the target based on the feedback; and if all this occurs in a context that supports rather than derails your efforts, you will achieve optimal human performance.

Ten years of translating this theory into disarmingly simple strategies has provided many schools, especially in California, with

By Michelle Karns and Ben McGee

a certain path to "closing the achievement gap." One of the first tenets of Parker's Strategic Schooling program requires a shift from seeing education as a factory manufacturing high school graduates to a greenhouse that grows learners. The factory that manufactures cars is rewarded for efficient production of a common model; the cars coming off the assembly line are the sum of their parts.

However, seeing education as a vibrant, thriving greenhouse changes all of the dynamics in operations. Most dramatically, it shifts the nature of the educator's relationship to the student. Instead of the cold, efficient manufacturing of the same end product, the greenhouse grows many types of plants in a warm and care-giving setting.

Plants, like students, are ever-changing and evolving, interacting with their environment and adjusting to achieve optimal growth. They are self-directing in that they grow, produce, and reproduce themselves. Teachers have to be apt gardeners with an incredible repertoire of growing strategies with an equally amazing collection of death-defying techniques. Since its inception in 2000, Strategic Schooling has helped literally hundreds of schools turn around.

Finding the patterns: Norms of reform

As we began to discern the lessons from our experiences with Strategic Schooling and the "turnaround" phenomenon, it seemed appropriate to check to see if other reformers had seen similar trends and patterns. We enjoyed the activity of backwards mapping our findings with those of our more renowned colleagues. As Einstein is supposed to have said, "All knowledge is the discovery of the pattern." It was validating to find the same trends in other efforts and in those across the nation. Fifteen norms of reform are woven throughout the stories below.

Creating the conditions for sustainability

The crisis of education is not about standards, strategies, and skills – it is about sustainability. Despite what *Waiting for Superman* would lead you to believe, our experience documents success at educating diverse student groups. We are beginning to unlock the code to creating the conditions

for sustainability. Each story provides a piece to the puzzle.

Roberta Ellis, the Title I Director of Tulsa Public Schools in 1992, was the first dynamic risk taker known to us to employ external facilitators to model instruction; organize explicit alignment between standards, curriculum and frequent assessments; and coordinate stakeholder participation.

Tulsa middle school administrator Travis Henderson brought parents and grandparents to school to function as advocates, hall walkers, homework helpers and behavior

managers. The efforts over one year, using resiliency research as tenets for reform, corrected a downward spiral in attendance, achievement and behavior. The school moved from the lowest performing to approximating the proficiency levels of the non-Title I schools.

Norms of reform

1. Focus on the teacher capacity to do the work (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

2. Leverage external resources to help validate the effort and provide needed support to change practices (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Connecting with others

Similarly, Tulsa Public Schools gave helm in 1999 to one of the lowest performing elementary schools to the youngest principal in the state. Armed with phenomenal drive, an instructional coach, an administrative mentor and a grant that helped fund extended-day activities and extensive professional

development, Principal Millard House facilitated a turnaround for his school and sustained high performance. This was due to his capacity to connect with others and develop quality relationships, build the airplane while flying it, generate loyalty among stakeholders and foster beliefs that the students could learn and that this team could teach!

Norms of reform

3. Build a strong team with the guidance of energetic leadership (Fullan, 2003).

4. Use emotional, educational, and organizational intelligences to drive a commitment to get the work done (Slotnik, 2010).

5. Foster beliefs consistent with the shared vision (Senge, 2005).

Believing in students' capacity

In 2003, Ben McGee and Wendy Web, superintendents of Youngstown City Schools in Ohio, leveraged the educational, organizational and political capital for a Gates Early College high school for the poorest community with highest number of risk factors in the state of Ohio.

The Gates Foundation mandated that all students involved in the project must be at least two years behind grade level in reading and math. The students attended the local state university from 9th grade through 12th. When they graduate, they receive an Associate's degree in liberal arts. The school is one of the best performing high schools in the state, receiving the rank of excellent with over 90 percent of the students performing at and above proficient.

Norms of reform

6. Create opportunities for achievement by believing in the students' capacity to do the work (Bernard, 2006).

7. Acknowledge that teachers will become how they perceive their value or lack of value (Sergiovanni, 2002).

8. Structure change with negotiables and collaborative efforts, not sanctions, threats, and punishment (Mintrop and Sunderman, 2009).

Strategies that make sense to teachers

A 2009-10 Ohio project in grades 5 through 8 resulted in every grade level mak-

ing achievement gains except seventh grade math. The project was designed to accelerate achievement by improving the alignment between the intended (standards), delivered (instruction) and attained (assessed) curriculum. The project incorporated a Strategic Schooling practice – Sacred Time – where administrators committed at least one hour daily for observations of student learning and instruction. Principals were coached to give reinforcing feedback with special emphasis on non-threatening, explicit, and data-driven input.

Three supplemental programs were used to aid students who were not on grade level and to reinforce those who were: "Read Naturally" for fluency, vocabulary and comprehension; "Simplified Solutions" for fifth-grade math through algebra; and "Standards Plus" for daily standards inoculations with grade-level interventions to fill academic gaps.

All three supplemental programs use intentional, explicit, direct instruction and all were designed by teachers.

Norms of reform

9. Use strategies that make sense to teachers and contribute to their learning and improved practice (Marzano, 2007; Wong, 2008).

10. Engage students in their grade-level outcomes, progress monitoring, and data collection from multiple measures (Reeves, 2008; Dufour, 2007; Schmoker, 2004).

Leadership matters

In 2009-10, Ana Boyenga, a first-year principal in the Atwater Elementary School District, coordinated a reform effort for her school using the Strategic Schooling model. Boyenga took her school to the 800 mark for API, and significantly changed the instructional delivery of standards through targeted, direct instruction.

District Superintendent Melinda Hennes would attribute the gains to the understanding that learning is the work of a school system, teaching is the tool, and leadership coherence and collaboration ensures the quality of the effort.

Norms of reform

11. Use all stakeholders to contribute to student achievement (Dufour, 2007).

12. Know that leadership matters and coherence is the key (Marzano, 2010; Fullan, 2010a).

Building a capacity to teach effectively

Charlotte Knox, a reform facilitator who uses the Strategic Schooling tools, worked with 22 different sites in 2009-10. All 22 made significant API gains and met their API targets, with 12 of the schools meeting both API and AYP targets. Knox teaches grade-level teams how to truly deliver a well planned curriculum where grade-level standards, adopted materials, pacing guides, assessments, and testing awareness are fully aligned. She invents teacher materials to match identified student needs. As a student of Madeline Hunter, she helps teachers work within a mastery construct and uses data, presentation of student work, and increased feedback and praise to validate the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

What we learn from her schools, teachers, and continuing success is that building capacity to teach more effectively is never a poor investment. Instruction has to adapt to the environmental changes that contribute to distracting and disrupting learning. Knowing how to keep students "hooked" into learning is a persistent issue in schools where children's lives are chaotic or uncertain. These conditions have to be mitigated for learning to occur.

Norms of reform

13. Hone pro-social behavioral protocol to mitigate the uncertainty and chaos of students' lives. The two best examples with the greatest evidentiary base are the Good Behavior Game and Class-wide Peer Tutoring. Both have long-term consequences that make it more likely that students will be successful in life (Embry, 2009).

14. Invest in teacher capacity, student success experiences, and the social emotional undertones of the student's circumstances (Promise Neighborhoods, Johns Hopkins, 2010; Fullan, 2010b) .

15. Understand that all "gaps" fall into one of three categories: language (students in limited English literate environments), learning (needing strategies to access) and literacy (requiring skill specific interventions) (Johnson, 2010).

Sustaining the change

We have only tapped into a few of the many hundreds of success stories. Our problem has not been demonstrating that teaching and learning for children in varied demographic groups is possible. A clear picture of the transparent leadership role; the need for teacher collaboration and stakeholder involvement; and the value of standards-driven curricula, data analysis and frequent assessment have been well articulated, documented and validated throughout the literature and are all contributing factors in creating a school culture that succeeds.

The difficulty is sustaining the change. We are convinced that there are five basic capacity issues that must be addressed to influence sustainability and create the conditions for students to achieve.

Capacity one: Teachers demonstrate through pedagogy, academic and social relationships, and teaching competence the ability to meet the everyday needs of diverse student groups (Elmore, 2004).

Capacity two: Teachers and stakeholders create the conditions under which all

Our problem has not been demonstrating that teaching and learning for children in varied demographic groups is possible; the difficulty is sustaining change.

children will learn and adjust for difference without compromising standards and expectations for quality (Fullan, 2008).

Capacity three: Teachers know what they want the students to learn, know and do (Hunter, 1993).

Capacity four: Teachers shape a student's belief in his/her own capacity. Students must

monitor evidence of their ability to learn (Dufour and Karhanek, 2010).

Capacity five: Students will learn with good teaching, a strong curriculum and resources to maintain the effort. Anything less is a violation of civil rights and victimization of the child (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Embracing your neighborhood heroes

Many low-performing students do not have a strong belief in their own capacity to learn. Part of the responsibility for nourishing student belief in their own capacity as learners falls to the greenhouse keeper, the teacher. This has always been the case. Most of us remember our best and worst teachers because of the impact they had on our lives as academic and social learners. It is an awesome responsibility and a heroic act.

We needn't wait for a superhero. It is likely she lives in the neighborhood. He probably has taught your child. When you meet classroom heroes, embrace them with respect and kindness; they are shaping our future. ■

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Michelle Karns is an educational consultant. Ben McGee is a professor at Youngstown State University.